

**Forest Preserves of Cook County
Conservation & Policy Council
Meeting Minutes for February 4, 2019**

Call to Order. Council chairman Wendy Paulson called the meeting to order at 9:30 am. The following Council members and others attended:

Advisory Council Members

Wendy Paulson, Chairman
Mark Templeton
Alan Bell
Commissioner Stanley Moore
Emily Harris
Laurel Ross
Maria Pesquiera
Michael DeSantiago
Shelley Spencer
Sylvia Jenkins
Terry Guen

Forest Preserve Staff

Arnold Randall
Eileen Figel
Cathy Geraghty
Delio Calzolari

Presenters

Stephenie Presseler, Moraine Valley
Community College
Benjamin Cox, Friends of the Forest
Preserves
Bob Megquier, Openlands

Representatives from the Chicago Botanic Garden, Chicago Zoological Society, Forest Preserves Foundation, Openlands, Friends of the Forest Preserves and the Field Museum were also in attendance.

Welcome. Wendy Paulson called the meeting to order at 9:30 am and welcomed new Council members Alan Bell, Maria Pesquiera and Shelley Spencer. She called the Council's attention to the updated resource guide which includes bios for the new Council members. Wendy thanked out-going Council members Falona Joy, Rob Castaneda and Peter Ellis for their service. Wendy acknowledged Cicely Fleming and Mary Rita Luecke from Commissioner Suffredin's office. Wendy also acknowledged the passing of Harper College Professor Craig Stettner who cultivated a love of nature and frequently brought his students on bird walks and other visits to the Forest Preserves.

Wendy reminded Council members that the work they do today builds upon the work of the founders and previous civic advisory committees. She described how these leaders valued nature and strove to protect the Forest Preserves. Their 1921 report stated that, "one day in the country is worth a month in the city." Wendy added, "We can't forget why we are here. This thread binds us with the founders from 100 years ago, and with previous advisory Councils."

Approval of minutes. A motion was made by Laurel Ross, seconded by Emily Harris, to approve minutes from the meeting of September 24, 2018. The minutes were approved.

Public Comment. There were no comments from the public.

Community College Conservation Summit. Sylvia Jenkins introduced Moraine Valley Community College Sustainability Officer Stephenie Presseler who provided an update on the recent Conservation Summit which included representatives from every community college in Cook County and the City Colleges of Chicago. Stephenie explained that the purpose of the summit was to explore how colleges can better engage with and help build support for the Forest Preserves. She stated that participants were excited to explore a range of ideas and agreed we should continue to work together. As a result, new partnerships are already being established. For example, Wilbur Wright College is working with the FPCC to develop new opportunities for students to work in the preserves.

Bob Megquier concurred that it was a great day. He stated, “It is one thing to say that, but it another thing to experience it. People in my discussion group were really fascinated by the history of the preserves and why they are here. This led to a real question about how we use the preserves to engage schools and colleges. Every possible subject is taught at the community colleges, and all those are opportunities to engage students and get them outside. So how do we get teachers comfortable with that?” Wendy responded that having the Forest Preserves as a living classroom opens up all sorts of possibilities. She was surprised to learn that there are 250,000 students in our community colleges. Wendy also noted that the English language teacher takes his students to the preserves and explained that he always has everyone’s full attention when they are outside in nature. She thanked Sylvia for hosting the summit.

Bob stated that the challenge now is to harness this energy and identify specific actions we can take. One idea is to create a FPCC staff liaison for each college. Another idea is to replicate this effort with four-year colleges and universities.

Welcome. Wendy welcomed Commissioner Bridget Degnen who joined the meeting in progress.

Building Community of Support. Laurel Ross, Benjamin Cox and Bob Megquier reported on efforts to build awareness and support. They are meeting first with the seven new commissioners, and want to meet with all commissioners on a more regular basis.

The following issues were discussed:

- Commissioner Suffredin has started a Forest Preserves task force, chaired by Jane Balaban. Laurel will participate on the task force.
- Laurel met with Commissioner Degnen and with Commissioner Lowry’s staff.
- Wendy Paulson and Benjamin Cox met with Commissioner Scott Britton and Commissioner Kevin Morrison.
- Michael DeSantiago has been working with CEP to engage Boys and Girls clubs.
- Arnold Randall and staff have provided briefings for all the new commissioners.
- Commissioner Moore stated that the Forest Preserves are important to his district because they allow families an outlet to spend time in nature. He added, “I see people out jogging, biking, and pushing strollers. Since this administration has taken over, the Forest Preserves have really turned around.”
- Alan Bell agreed that it is important to engage non-traditional users.
- Benjamin explained that the Commissioners are responsible for the entire Forest Preserves—not just land within their districts.
- Bob Megquier explained that staff and partners have been meeting with village boards and public entities to share presentations about the Forest Preserves and encourage people to visit them.
- Beth Dunn from the Chicago Botanic Garden worked with Anthony Tindall to reach out to eight villages near the Garden. The Garden also hosts Go Green Illinois and Cathy Geraghty will be presenting at their March meeting.
- Michael DeSantiago and Anthony Tindall presented to the Village of Niles board.
- There have been 80 meetings so far with village boards, rotary clubs, chambers of commerce, etc.
- The Illinois Environmental Council has recommended hosting tours of the Forest Preserves for state legislators and other elected officials.
- The Illinois Association of Conservation and Forest Preserve Districts met last week. Many districts are in the same boat—they have huge capital needs and they need resources for restoration and other work. Delio Calzolari and Arnold Randall explained that other districts are capped out at the top of their levy; FPCC is not, but would still need authority to raise resources. Arnold added that we need to make people aware that it does take resources to maintain and restore the Forest Preserves.
- Bob suggested continued outreach to build support for additional resources, including additional summits, commissioner connections, and presentations at public forums. He added that FPCC is not alone; many forest preserve districts share the same needs, and there is power in that shared purpose.
- Laurel stated that the working group would like to help new Council members participate in these efforts. She added

that Sylvia has been honored by the Chicago Audubon Society as the educator of the year because of her work to connect community college students to nature.

- Mike DeSantiago asked if we should be doing similar outreach to state legislators. Benjamin indicated that he met with John D’Amico and it would be good to have a follow up meeting—especially if legislation starts to move in Springfield.
- Alan Bell added that it would be good to know what is the “ask” of state legislators-- funding needs, etc. Commissioner Bridget Degnen agreed it is important to identify a few priority “asks” that can be worked on over the year. She added that all the Commissioners are in favor of open space and may be able to help set up meetings with legislators.
- Maria Pesquiera will attend an event with Dr. Zarr focused on using the Forest Preserves for improved health.
- Bob also recommended Council members read *The Nature of Americans*, a powerful report about how people feel about nature. Eileen Figel will send a link to the Council.

Legislative Update. Delio Calzolari reported that the Illinois Association of Forest Preserve Districts has established a task force to work together on a legislative agenda to provide resources for conservation. Delio will participate on the task force. Delio explained that past state capital bills included conservation needs, but in 2010 a “lock box” amendment mandated that any revenue from a motor fuel tax be directed to transportation projects. This is the funding source currently being explored by the state for the proposed capital bill. Therefore, any funding for FPCC, the Zoo and Garden would need to be transportation related. FPCC is working with partners to make the case that a capital bill should be broader. For example, the state is likely to legalize recreational marijuana; these resources could fund conservation and other needs. Delio explained that there is a lot of uncertainty at this time. Many state legislators are new and there is a huge focus on state funding for education and other priority needs. The following issues were discussed:

- Mark Templeton asked that any capital funding received be used for projects which are consistent with the Next Century Conservation Plan. Arnold responded that proposed projects include repair and extension of trails and repair of parking lots. Arnold added that FPCC won’t invest in parking lots that are no longer needed, but the district does not currently have resources to remove decommissioned lots. In addition, FPCC needs to repair, maintain, and make accessible parking lots that are being used. Emily Harris added that she is happy to reach out to allies within the disability community who will support this work. Emily added that there is also a need to improve connections between transit stops and forest preserve entrances. Terry Guen asked that green infrastructure strategies also be incorporated into parking lot improvements and decommissioning. Terry also suggested FPCC explore strategies to help reduce and clean up waste along roadways.
- Arnold added that we also need to think about long term resources, but the current opportunity is a capital bill, and this is where we need to focus efforts now. Delio added we are also looking at working with IDNR to direct more funding to restoration.

Position Papers Updates. Committee chairs presented updates on each position paper. The following issues were discussed.

(1) Land acquisition/disposition. Laurel Ross stated that a key question is, “Why do we need more land? Why do we need to expand to 90,000 acres?” She offered several answers to this question:

- We now lag behind other NE IL counties in terms of the number of protected acres per population.
- There are some very important connections and buffers we must create to protect existing land.
- Some areas of Cook County are under-served.
- Forest Preserves are also an important part of the solution to climate change.

Laurel stated that the working group will also provide guidelines for when, if ever, property should be disposed of. She explained that there are constant, insistent demands from adjacent municipalities to use the land for non-Forest Preserve purposes, and there is a need to complete the on-going review of existing licenses granting private use of the Forest Preserves.

(2) Conservation Recreation. Terry Guen explained that the working group moved from a concept of “non-conservation” (do we really need swimming pools and golf courses?) to an approach which asks, “Are we reaching the people that need to get connected to nature?” She explained that the team is reviewing potential tools to determine what is compatible with the mission, including the “fit triangle” developed by FPCC several years ago and the McMillan matrix referenced in FPCC’s Recreation Master Plan. Mike DeSantiago presented an evaluation worksheet which can be used to establish appropriate criteria such as mission fit, ecological impact, economic impact, community impact, etc.

(3) Scaling up volunteers. Wendy Paulson explained that volunteers are at the nexus of nature and people goals, and engaging volunteers is critical to fulfilling these goals. She explained that volunteers are an almost infinite resource and the importance of engaging volunteers was recognized in the 1921 advisory committee report. There is no debate about whether volunteers are important; the focus is how to ramp up engagement. Long-time steward Jane Balaban described how volunteer stewards have expanded over recent decades and are now maintaining 95 sites across the FPCC. Jane indicated that far more volunteers are needed to meet the NCCP goal to restore and maintain 30,000 acres. Jane stated, “One thing that has kept us engaged is the land. It is an absolutely amazing experience to watch a brush-filled, dark, weedy, neglected woodland evolve into a beautiful vibrant place where birds, coyotes, salamanders and people interact and connect to nature. That is the core of getting more volunteers.” Maria Pesquiera asked what it would take to engage more people and how we are recruiting volunteers—especially from under-represented communities.

(4) Racial equity. Emily Harris acknowledged that racial equity is a difficult subject to discuss. She referenced research done by MPC, UIC, and other organizations that provides irrefutable documentation that Federal and local government policies created racial and economic segregation in the region. While the practices have evolved over time, they continue to persist today. We want to take an honest look at the Forest Preserves’ history and explore how we can move towards equity. Emily explained that the group will focus first on racial equity, then look at diversity & inclusion in the next phase.

Discussion. The following issues were discussed:

- Commissioner Moore explained that people making decisions about where to invest resources tend to spend money in areas they are familiar with. He wants to pay attention to all parts of the county—especially those that have been under-served. He thanked Arnold for his commitment to equitable investment.
- Maria Pesquiera asked how we can apply a lens of racial and ethnic equity across the board. She urged the working groups to consider this from a strength-based position because all communities have the ability to contribute.
- Benjamin Cox explained that Friends of the Forest Preserves is working very hard to be inclusive. The Centennial Volunteers initiative intentionally works with communities to engage people who have not been connecting to nature. What has happened in the last 8 years is a complete turnaround.
- Laura Milkert stated that the Field Museum works with FPCC to pair up community organizations with a specific site in order to expand stewardship.

Beijing Forest Initiative. Terry Guen and Arnold Randall provided an update on their recent trip to Beijing to share best practices for conservation. Arnold explained that FPCC is recognized around the world. People recognize the value of the system and the work we are doing now. This is a reflection on all of us. He indicated that the Beijing team will pursue a pilot project exploring how to increase bio-diversity and how to better connect people to nature. The ministry will send a delegation to Cook County in June.

Adjournment. Wendy encouraged everyone to join the pre-meeting tour of Shabbona/Sand Ridge/Green Lake and the River Oaks golf course prior to the March 13 meeting. She also encouraged everyone to attend the WildThings conference on Feb. 23 in Rosemont. Mark Templeton made a motion to adjourn which was seconded by Shelley Spencer and unanimously approved. The meeting was adjourned at 11:58 pm.